

Nature Loves an Untidy Garden



The autumnal equinox came a few days ago. To be more precise, it was exactly 8:44 am just after breakfast on Sunday, September 22, when fall in New England officially arrived. But we didn't need the Old Farmer's Almanac to remind us that seasonal change was already underway.

Familiar songbirds are strangely quiet. They have either gone silent or they have departed altogether, heading south in successive nighttime migrations. Different species leave at different times so we should turn off the outside lights for the next few weeks to help reduce light pollution and ensure their safe passage.

Those delightful hummingbirds that visited every flower and regularly emptied our sugar-water feeders all summer have disappeared as well. They are flying south to Florida or across the Gulf of Mexico to Central America where they'll find food and warmth throughout the coming winter. Seed-eating birds like cardinals, chickadees, goldfinches and sparrows are still here but we don't see them often. They are laying low, molting and growing new flight feathers while replenishing their fat stores. But we might spy one or two foraging in the tangled, brushy places where the lawn mower and weed whacker have not scraped the area bare.

Actually, fall is the perfect season to watch your summertime garden grow a bit wild. Forget cleaning up all those sticks and stems because many birds and other small creatures will be needing safe places to hunker down during snowstorms. You might also allow your carefully manicured lawn to get a little shaggy and ask the landscaper not to bring his leaf blower. Refrain from clipping or dead-heading spent flowers or "neatening up" the property edges. Give those handsome sunflowers and native grasses time to ripen and form seeds and then leave them standing for the duration of the cold season. Watch with satisfaction as winter birds flock to nature's harvest table.

Fall is the last hurrah for insect pollinators such as bees, moths, butterflies and fireflies, and they have much to accomplish during their short lifespans. In just a few weeks as newly emerged adults, they must fulfill their purpose to attract mates and deposit eggs, ensuring survival of the next generation. Swallowtail and monarch butterflies deposit eggs on their host plants so when the tiny caterpillars hatch out, there will be an appropriate food source readily available. Other insects including spiders and beetles lay eggs inside dried-up flower stalks or in the nooks and crannies found under tree bark and beneath rotten logs. While 70% of native wasps and bees nest underground, as many as 30% will spend the winter tucked inside hollow stems. Clearly, our declining population of insects needs abundant natural cover to fulfill all these intricate life cycles.

Finally, the role played by trees dropping millions of leaves in our backyards can be hugely important to these stories of survival. Instead of wondering “what to do about the leaves,” we should put them to good use. Gently rake them into piles for spreading across the garden or underneath trees and shrubs where they’ll shelter hundreds of microscopic invertebrates. These organisms feed on the leaves and break them down releasing stored nutrients to enrich the soil. In this manner, we are creating “soft landings” or safe havens to support a healthy ecosystem.

So, let’s embrace a simpler, more earth-friendly fall clean-up routine that doesn’t interrupt the natural process of growth, decay and renewal - where an untidy garden sustains wildlife and fallen leaves are turned into compost. Knowing we’ve done our part to help heal the planet, we might even sleep better at night. What’s not to like about that?